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The Fallacy of Many Questions: Or, How to Stop Beating Your Wife

FRANK FAIR
Sam Houston University

Perhaps the most interesting thing about the "Fallacy of Many Questions" is that while everyone seems to agree that the proverbial wife-beating question commits it, there does not seem to be agreement on exactly what the fallacy consists of. Lennart Aqvist and Nuel Belnap, two who have written monographs on the logic of questions, give different accounts of the fallacy which I would like to set out, along with my own thoughts on the matter.

To introduce this topic, I'd like to call your attention to two different types of questions. One type is comprised of questions that have substantive presuppositions. A question such as "What are the prime numbers between ten and twenty?" has as its substantive presupposition that there are prime numbers between ten and twenty. On the other hand, a question such as "Did Tom go to the movies last night?" seems to presuppose only that either Tom did or did not go. In other words, the presupposition of the question about Tom seems to be simply a logical truth. This gives rise to a distinction that is made in the literature on the logic of questions between "safe" questions and "risky" questions. A safe question Q is one that has a logical truth as its presupposition, e.g., the question about Tom is a safe question. A risky question, on the other hand, is one whose presupposition may be true or false since it is not a logical truth.

On the basis of this distinction, here is how Lennart Aqvist views the Fallacy of Many Questions in his book *A New Approach to the Logical Theory of Interrogatives*: "I do not think that anybody would really contend that the Fallacy of Many Questions is committed by every risky question, i.e., by every question having some *possibly false* presupposition. The alleged fallacy is rather taken to be committed only by such risky questions as indeed have a *false* presupposition."¹ On this understanding of the matter, the fallacy is probably fairly wide-

¹ Aqvist, *A New Approach to the Logical Theory of Interrogatives: Part I, Analysis* (Uppsala, 1965), pp. 74-75.

spread since it is easy to be unaware that the presupposition of one's question is false.

Nuel Belnap develops a different conception of the situation in a work entitled *Erotetic Logic*. He contrasts the question "Has John stopped beating his wife?" with the question "How fast did Jones drive down Main Street last night?" It is Belnap's opinion that "everyone knows that the wife-beating question 'presupposes' that John used to beat his wife."² Belnap says further that

the style of the wife-beating interrogative wrongly suggests that it is used to put a proper yes-no question which is free of substantive presuppositions, while there is nothing similarly misleading about the "how fast" interrogative, which wears its presuppositions on its sleeve. So much for the badly named "Fallacy of Many Questions."³

For Belnap, then, the Fallacy of Many Questions seems to rest on a distinction between questions which are "honest" in displaying their substantive presuppositions and those "tricky" questions which tend to hide their substantive presuppositions.

I am afraid, though, that there is more to the story than this. In particular, I want to claim that what "everyone knows" is false, i.e., I want to claim that the wife-beating question *does not presuppose* that John used to beat his wife. Indeed, the reason that there is a "fallacy" involved in asking the question is that an implication is commonly taken to hold which does not, in reality, hold at all.

To see this, consider Belnap's question again: "Has John stopped beating his wife?" If this question is assimilated to the question about Tom going to the movies, then it has as its presupposition just the tautological disjunction

S v -S

where 'S' abbreviates "John has stopped beating his wife," and '-S' abbreviates "It is not the case that John has stopped beating his wife." The difficulty with this question arises because *both* 'S' and '-S' are taken to imply "John used to beat his wife." If this implication really held, not only would John be embarrassed, but we would have an odd situation in which what appeared to be a logical truth implied a contingent statement. Something has definitely gone wrong.

The place where it has gone wrong is the presumption that the statement "It is not the case that John has stopped beating his wife" implies "John used to beat his wife." It is this presumption that leads people to

² Belnap, *Erotetic Logic* (mimeographed, n.d.), p. 3.1/2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.1/9.

say that our question about John "presupposes" that John used to beat his wife. The reason that this presumption is made (and here is the mistake that engenders the label "fallacy") is that "It is not the case that John has stopped beating his wife" is taken as equivalent to the quite different statement: (S*) John has *not* stopped beating his wife. Now, it is true that this statement implies that John used to beat his wife. Consequently, if 'S' were equivalent to 'S*', then 'S' would imply that John used to beat his wife.

To see that 'S' is not equivalent to 'S*' we need to consider what we are trying to say when we say 'S', i.e., when we say that John has stopped beating his wife. I suggest that we intend to say something along these lines:

- (1) John beat his wife at some time t_1 which is earlier than now, *and*
- (2) John beat his wife periodically after t_1 until some time t_2 which is also prior to now, *and*
- (3) Since t_2 John has not beaten his wife on at least one occasion on which he normally would have nor has he beaten her on any such occasion after t_2 .

I do not want to claim that this is a completely adequate analysis of 'S', of what we intend to say when we say that John has left off wife-beating.⁴ However, I will claim that something very nearly like it is an adequate analysis in these two respects: first, the analysis will include a statement like (1) about prior wife-beating and, secondly, the analysis will be *conjunctive* in character.

If it is allowed that my analysis is a reasonable facsimile of an adequate analysis of 'S', then it is apparent that 'S' will look like this:

-[(1) & (2) & (3)]

The point of this is that if (1) is false, if it is not true that John beat his wife at some time prior to the present, then 'S' is *true*. But if (1) is false, then I think that we would want to say that 'S*', "John has not stopped beating his wife," is *also false*. So we have a situation in which 'S' is true while 'S*' is false. The obvious and straight-forward conclusion is that 'S' or "It is not the case that John has stopped beating his wife" is not equivalent to 'S*', "John has not stopped beating his wife."

With this result the air of paradox vanishes. "Has John stopped beating his wife?" can take its rightful place as a "proper" yes-no question since it has a logical truth for its presupposition. The confusion con-

⁴ An analysis similar to this is suggested by A. J. Ayer in his *Language, Truth, and Logic*, p. 76, but Ayer does not apply it to questions.

cerning it is seen to have nothing really to do with questions but rather with inattention to our talk about a person's ceasing to do something. Belnap seems simply to be wrong when he thinks that the wife-beating question hides a substantive presupposition. The case seems to be the reverse; the question appears to have a substantive presupposition that it does not in fact have.

But while Belnap is simply wrong, I believe that Aqvist is merely misguided. Recall his suggestion that a question whose presupposition happens to be false commits the Fallacy of Many Questions. This seems to me to be a useless notion since so many questions have false presuppositions and since it obscures the fact that we may at times behave quite correctly in asking a question that happens to have a false presupposition.

Where does that leave the Fallacy of Many Questions? I would like to suggest that the wife-beating question be grouped with some other yes-no questions that are mistakenly assumed to have substantive presuppositions. I have no general procedure for picking out such questions, but I can give some examples. "Has your husband gotten out of jail yet?", "Did you clean up your room?", or the question a reporter asked Frank Sinatra's lawyer after Sinatra had finished testifying before a congressional committee concerning his alleged Mafia connections, "Has Frank's testifying here today cleared his reputation?" Sinatra's lawyer became very indignant at this question and claimed that it was "loaded"; he said that it was just as bad as if he had asked the reporter in a loud voice at a party, "Do you enjoy being a homosexual?"

Sinatra's probity and Gay Liberation aside, it seems to me that we can usefully point out a certain type of mistake and call it the "Fallacy of the Loaded Question." The mistake that is involved in this fallacy is the one made by the hearer of a question who thinks that the question presupposes something it does not in fact presuppose. This understanding of the matter is quite different from the traditional understanding of the Fallacy of Many Questions where it was assumed that the fallacy was committed by *overlooking* a genuine presupposition. In the understanding of the matter that I recommend, the fallacy consists not in an error of omission, but rather in an error of commission, taking a question to presuppose too much, not too little.

In conclusion, I think that the Fallacy of the Loaded Question is one that is useful to recognize because asking loaded questions is a standard feature of aggressive reporting by journalists of all media. Hopefully, if we are aware of this fallacy, we will be better able to sift out fact from fable.